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It is refreshing to see a volume with a genuinely ambitious aim such as Philip Goldberg’s American Veda: From Emerson and the Beatles to Yoga and Meditation. How Indian Spirituality Changed the West. In this book he aims to trace the influence of Indian “spirituality” in the United States since the times of Emerson and the Transcendentalists. Further, not only does he deal with the history of religion, but also the world of popular culture. While Goldberg does not always perfectly succeed, I find his effort commendable and eminently readable.

By his own statement, Philip Goldberg is not an academically trained scholar, so he does not see his book as an academic treatise (5). Rather, he approaches his subject as a journalist and as a sympathetic participant-observer. Reviewing Goldberg’s book as an academic text would therefore be unfair. However, considering the ambitious aim of the book and the fact that Goldberg claims to base it on “more than three hundred formal interviews,” (2) this is a certainly a book scholars in the field should note.

Goldberg argues that “Indian spirituality” has exerted a powerful influence on the West literally since the ancient Greeks, gathering momentum in the early 18th century with Western translations of Indian texts, until surging mightily in the late 1960s, after which its influence has continued strong. The watershed event was the Beatles’ visit to the Maharishi, when Indian spirituality entered media attention on an unprecedented scale. While Goldberg does deal with Vivekananda, Yogananda, and other predecessors to this event, the bulk of the book (chapters 8–18) is focused on what happened after it. Goldberg is upfront with his basic premise: he sees Indian spirituality as an overwhelmingly positive contribution to the West (which Goldberg, however, practically limits to the United States). While by no means whitewashing history, this translates into a sympathetic treatment of nearly all the groups and persons that he studies in his book (finding the author’s “baddies”
could, by the way, be a useful exercise for undergraduates).

*American Veda* is divided into eighteen chapters, dealing with the history of the Transcendentalists, New Thought and the Theosophists, Swami Vivekananda and the Vedanta Society, Paramahansa Yogananda, the Beatniks and the NRMs of the 1960s and 1970s, but also with the history of yoga, guru scandals, contemporary teachers such as Deepak Chopra as well as the influence of Indian spirituality on music, literature, the movies, physics and (in a particularly interesting chapter) on the academy. Goldberg throws his net far and wide, capturing many interesting fishes (I certainly learned much new here), but at times he may be a little too liberal in what to keep. In particular, claiming to find Vedantic thoughts camouflaged in John Gray’s *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*, stretches credulity.

What, then, is Goldberg’s “Indian spirituality”? For several good reasons Goldberg chooses not to use the term “Hinduism,” but rather (in addition to “Vedic” in the modern, popular sense) the compound *Vedanta-yoga*, since those are “the components of India’s spiritual tradition that most affected Western culture.” (2–4) This is not unproblematic. To write that the differences between the schools of Vedanta in practice are “virtually meaningless” (350) is a major blunder. Take another look at the practices of the Hare Krishnas and the followers of Gangaji (1942–), all claiming to be Vedantists, and tell me whether you can see a difference? Further, while focusing on Vedanta and Yoga does make sense for most of the groups studied in the book, it does occasionally land Goldberg in trouble, as illustrated in his unease with how to treat and understand the *kirtan* phenomenon (336–337) or tantric teachers (182–186).

Goldberg’s most glaring simplification, however, and one that is inexcusable even in a popular presentation like this, lies in his understanding of the nature of what this Vedanta is. When he compares Vedanta with, for example, the perennialism of Aldous Huxley and the “spiritual, not religious” mindset (11–12, 22), he fails to see the reason for the striking similarity: that the Vedanta of Vivekananda, Yogananda, and the other early missionar-
Despite its academic faults, Goldberg’s book is an excellent overview of its topic, useful for many kinds of audiences. I could see myself using parts from the book in teaching undergraduates. While the book unfortunately does not include a bibliography, its endnotes offer many helpful links to further reading and websites. Authored as it is by a journalist and for a general public, American Veda is further written in an admirably lively, often humorous style, seldom found in more scholarly publications. Fun examples include “Living the Vida Veda,” the caption of a section on Transcendental Meditation in the 1980s (169); and “Oy Veda!” (320) dealing with the interesting question of why Jews seem to be overrepresented in the movements dealt with in the book.